

The New Egyptian Parliament: No Voice Over Sisi

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Dec 10, 2015

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December 10, 2015

Political reform, in nearly every country on earth, relies on three principles. The first is that a powerful state can impose its influence on the country it rules and force the entirety of its people to submit to the laws it issues. Secondly, and in contrast to the first principle, there must be in place mechanisms which force the state, despite its influence, to work for the public good and not for the benefit of a single ruler or the interests of a single group. These mechanisms take the shape of democratic accountability and rule of law which applies to everyone—government and citizen alike. Justice and rule of law manifest themselves when no one, whoever they may be, is above the law and when the principles upon which law is based are universal human values accepted by all.

However, in the case of Egypt, there is a state which rules by force of arms and enacts laws not with the purpose of establishing a social contract between the government and the people but rather with the goal of ensuring the survival of the state and its beneficiaries. In this type of situation, referred to by political scientists as a “kleptocracy,” the regime only allows civil society to serve its interests and policies. After Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi issued a number of laws ensuring his and the regime’s political survival, including laws banning public demonstrations and limiting freedom of expression among others, the Sisi government then conducted parliamentary elections with the goal of producing laws harmonious with the wishes of the government. In a move without precedent even in the darkest days of Mubarak’s rule, election candidates were appointed by the security apparatus. “There are security restrictions and direct selections of parliamentary representatives coming from the security apparatus despite these individuals’ lack of experience in politics” said Gameela Ismail, an activist and head of the Constitution Party (Hizb el-Doustour), at a Middle East Institute conference held in Washington DC just before the start of elections. These types of considerations in the selection of parliamentary representatives lead to bad governance, laying the groundwork for increased poverty rates due not to a lack of resources but rather to a lack of good governance.

While activists and politicians alike criticized the entire electoral process for its lack of even the most minimal democratic standards, the Sisi government believes that its policies are aimed, first and foremost, at “preserving the Egyptian state that the Muslim Brotherhood almost succeeded in hijacking.” The Sisi government uses the rise of local, regional, and even international terrorism as a pretext for these policies and, therefore, presents the choice as one between either the terrorists or the dictatorship of Sisi and his bad governance. Of course, both the terrorists and the Sisi government benefit from one another in spreading their influence and attracting followers -- and both are achieving victories on the ground.

Sisi's government has succeeded in restraining, or for that matter terrorizing, the opposition that previously successfully ousted three governments (Mubarak, SCAF, and Morsi). By "terrorize" I am referring to the word's linguistic meaning: "to scare." Meanwhile, terrorism is on the rise in the Sinai and other areas. The downing of the Russian passenger jet over the Sinai is the clearest evidence of the ability of ISIS extremists to infiltrate the security apparatus. Moreover, these terrorists take Sisi's oppressive policies, especially against Islamists, as cover for conducting such operations.

Faced with the choice between Sisi's political pressures and ISIS' religious terrorism, the youth of Egypt—whose first priority was to change this very equation—chose to surrender their political agency during this period in order to ensure their personal safety. With this in mind, both voters and several political movements, refusing to choose between Sisi and ISIS, boycotted the electoral process. After the completion of the two-round election, the establishment of a non-democratic parliament with the primary goal of providing protection to Sisi's government is expected. This parliament will further weaken Sisi's opposition and facilitate the passage of any legislation that Sisi or his government wishes without any notable challenge.

Consequently, Sisi will have succeeded in fragmenting the criticism directed against him and his government and will be able to impose his rule for as long a period as possible. In the presence of laws banning public demonstrations and a government throwing protesters in prison, it is impossible to protest the current parliament. The only possible, but unlikely, scenario for protest is if Sisi himself chose to dissolve the parliament.

Egyptian voters' decision to abstain from elections was to be expected in a climate of frustration due to the failure of Sisi's government to resolve the primary issues facing the Egyptian citizen: unprecedented inflation, a fall in the value of the Egyptian pound, and the complete collapse of the tourism sector. The latter has created a domino effect on other industries upon which Egyptians rely for their daily sustenance, such as the service and transportation sectors. Even in the periods of increased terror during Mubarak's rule, Russian tourists kept the tourism industry from flat-lining. The complete cancellation of Russian flights to Egypt can be considered the final nail in the coffin of the Egyptian tourism sector. In addition to all of these issues, the disintegration of infrastructure, particularly in cities of Alexandria, Beheira, and other coastal cities, has recently become evident. When rains inundated the streets of these cities, life completely stopped.

All these factors and more have raised the level of frustration felt by average Egyptians. This feeling was expressed by one worker put out of work by the rains who could only find anger to express his opinion on a television interview saying, "Unemployment is rising, prices are rising and now they want to get rid of the subsidies?! Why? Because we loved him and chose him?!" The man then added in exasperation, "Damn Sisi, Morsi, Mubarak and the whole lot of them!!"

As one of the officials quipped during the first round of elections, "there weren't any breaches, complaints, or violations because there weren't any voters in the first place." It is as if the people are giving Sisi the green light to continue his autocratic policies without any participation from their part. At first glance it may seem that this complacency comes from a place of mercy, however, it could turn to a rage that shakes the Sisi government once the anger expressed by ordinary Egyptians explodes. ❖

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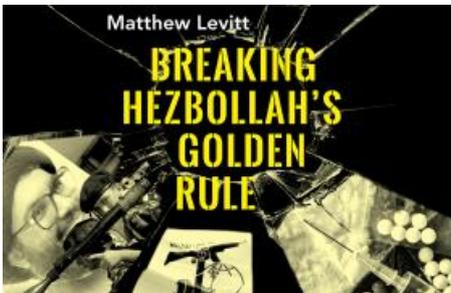
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